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ABSTRACT

Young people deserve to grow and thrive in good times and bad, in poverty and prosperity, in war and peace. Yet children still suffer from hunger, poverty, and maltreatment, even in a country as rich as the United States. This paper provides a historical background of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the kinds and nature of the services it provides, and how individuals can help UNICEF to provide a better environment for children. Recommendations include providing access to quality education, helping children to gain language and cultural training, encouraging them to develop self esteem and important life skills such as critical thinking and assertiveness, and teaching children to understand global problems such as pollution and destruction of the rain forest. People need to see every child as their own child, so that all people can learn to live productively in a world of great diversity. (MOK)

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"EVERY CHILD IS OUR CHILD"

Gwendolyn Calvert Baker
President and Chief Executive Officer
United States Committee for UNICEF

The Annual Conference of the Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children (Chicago Metro AEYC), an affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

January 25, 1996, 2:00 to 3:00 P.M.
Keynote Oration
International Ballroom
Chicago Hilton and Towers

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Thank you. I am extremely honored to have the opportunity to speak at this very important annual conference of the Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children. As someone who cares very deeply about children, I would like to commend each and every one of you for taking the time to sharpen and improve your skills as educators, administrators, day-care providers, and children's advocates.

I myself am a former educator -- I actually began my career as an elementary school teacher in Ann Arbor -- and so I know how critical gatherings like these are to one's professional development. I also know how difficult it can be to set aside three days to attend these workshops and really think about the ways you can enrich and enhance the learning experience of children.

By being here today, you show a real dedication to young people that warms my heart. I think it is entirely fitting that the

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theme of your conference is *First Call for Children*, a principle that was developed by the organization I work closely with -- UNICEF.

This important principle is based on a very simple idea: that children should have a "first call" on society's concerns and capacities, that young people deserve to grow and thrive in good times and bad, in poverty and prosperity, in war and peace.

It is a principle based not on any vested interest or sentimentality, but on the fact that it is in the early years of life that the mind and body grow. As each one of you is well aware, it is during childhood that personalities and values are formed. This is when society determines what kind of adults it will produce.

While most societies agree in principle that children are a valuable resource, they don't always practice what they preach. Just think of Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, or any of a number of other war-torn nations, where young boys and girls are being gunned down, tortured, raped, orphaned -- and generally forced to pay the price of adult wars they don't understand. Think of India, the Philippines, and many other countries, where children are doomed to a life of poverty and ignorance, because they must forsake school to work 14 or 15 hours a day in a factory, earning barely enough money to survive.

Even in the United States, children don't always come first. Here, in the richest country in the world, one out of every five children lives in poverty. And many children's advocates believe that the plight of millions of poor children will only worsen if Congress succeeds in cutting more social programs to balance the federal budget.

That's right, in the richest country in the world, we allow children to go hungry. We deny children quality education and adequate health care. We do little to stop the violence that kills so many children in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and of course, your home, Chicago. How can we as a society tolerate the fact that guns kill young people in this country at a rate of one every 98 minutes?

Isn't it time we rethink our priorities and treat children more like the precious resource they are? I know you all care about children, so I want to take the time now to explain how I think we can work together to ensure that children are given top priority, a "first call," if you will, not just in Chicago, but also across the United States, and around the world. My goal is to help you see, if you don't already, that all of us need to begin to think of every child as our own child.

Every Child Is Our Child -- that is actually the motto of the organization I head -- the U.S. Committee for UNICEF, which is the oldest and largest of 38 national committees set up around the world to support the work of UNICEF.

For those of you who don't know, UNICEF is the United Nations Children's Fund. It was founded in 1946 to help the children of post-war Europe and China. In 1950, its mandate was changed to focus on poor countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. Today, UNICEF provides health care, clean water, nutrition programs, education, sanitation facilities, and emergency assistance to children in more than 140 countries.

I would guess that quite a number of you are probably already familiar with UNICEF's impressive work for children. Long before I became president and CEO of the U.S. Committee, I was familiar with UNICEF's work -- just as many of you probably are -- thanks to those familiar little orange cartons you always see at Halloween.

You might be surprised to know that those nickels, dimes, and pennies have really added up over the years. Amazingly, U.S. children have raised more than $100 million since the U.S. Committee first began its "Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF" fundraising drive in 1950.

Perhaps you have wondered where this money has gone. I'd like to take a moment to tell you about some of the wonderful progress for children UNICEF has been able to achieve with the support of people like you and your students.

Did you know that 50 years ago, 25 million boys and girls died every year from hunger and preventable diseases like measles and whooping cough? Today, that number has been cut in half, thanks in large part to UNICEF's lifesaving work around the world.

The winner of the Nobel Peace Price in 1965, UNICEF has spearheaded major health campaigns that have benefited us all. For example, the agency worked with the World Health Organization to help to rid the world of smallpox, which used to kill millions. And UNICEF, in partnership with organizations such as Rotary International, can take much credit for the fact that polio is now poised to become the next disease to be wiped off the face of the earth.

These are astonishing accomplishments, especially when you consider that UNICEF operates on a budget of less than one billion

dollars a year. That's about one-seventh of what New York City spends on its schools!

I have had the privilege of watching UNICEF in action. And I'm sure you too would be impressed if you saw how much can be done with so little.

For example, did you know that a child suffering from a deadly bout of diarrheal dehydration can be saved for just pennies? That's right, virtually all deaths from diarrheal dehydration could be prevented by a simple, safe, and inexpensive method of treatment that requires no sophisticated medical equipment or supplies. It is called oral rehydration therapy, or ORT.

ORT involves giving a child a solution of clean water, glucose, and salt to replace the water and salts lost by the body during bouts with diarrhea. Each year, UNICEF saves one million lives by distributing almost 30 million packets of oral rehydration salts at a cost of just 15 cents each.

(Talk about ORT clinics you saw in Dominican Republic. Mention their minimal cost and explain how pleased people are to have these clinics in their communities.)

Did you know that for just 17 dollars, a child can be fully immunized against measles, whooping cough, diphtheria, tetanus, polio, and tuberculosis? A ten-year effort recently led by UNICEF and the World Health Organization has succeeded in immunizing 80 percent of the world's children against these six killer diseases. I'm pleased to tell you this public health campaign is credited with saving the lives of three million children <u>each year</u>.

(UNICEF's inoculation programs are community-led. I was impressed by the door-to-door immunization effort I saw in El Salvador on my first trip for the U.S. Committee for UNICEF.)

People in Chicago could undoubtedly learn a thing or two from UNICEF on this front. I'll bet most of you did not know that the child mortality rate for children of color in your city lags behind a number of developing countries, including Colombia and Sri Lanka.

Another area where UNICEF has had amazing success is in helping to provide poor people with access to safe drinking water, which can reduce child deaths by 55 percent.

(Talk about the man-made lake you saw near Mekelle. Mention that fetching water is a woman's burden. Explain how you picked up a jug yourself and was amazed at how heavy it was. End by letting them know how this simple project will help to improve the lives of women from this area, and that by freeing up their time and energy, the project will also benefit their children and, ultimately, their entire community. Note that the cost of a shallow well in Ethiopia is just $150.)

Through my extensive travels, I have been able to see just how much can be achieved when people work together to put the needs of children first.

But neither I nor UNICEF are blind to all that remains to be done. Particularly in the areas that lie beyond child survival. Increasing violence and racial hatred, worsening poverty, rising joblessness, the scourge of AIDS, and a growing disregard for the global environment are just some of the daunting challenges that <u>all</u>

children -- whether they live in the developing or industrialized world -- face today.

It's clear such difficult problems won't be easy to resolve. But I am convinced that educators like you can do a great deal to provide young people with the wisdom and courage they need to surmount challenges that can appear at times to be intractable.

I believe that if we teach our children -- at a very young age -- to understand and appreciate diversity, we can help them build a future in which the negative forces of discrimination, hatred, and hostility are greatly diminished.

I believe that if we can ensure that all children, particularly girls, have an equal access to quality education throughout their lives, we will move closer to reducing poverty, which is increasingly becoming a woman's burden both in the industrialized and the developing world.

I believe that if we help our children gain the language training and cultural understanding they need to succeed in an increasingly global economy, we will see them prosper in a world where the competition for jobs grows stiffer each day.

I believe that if we encourage our children to develop self-esteem and important life skills such as critical thinking and assertiveness, we can help them better combat scourges like AIDS.

I believe that if we teach our children to understand that problems like pollution and the destruction of the rain forest are global concerns, we can help to bring about an end to the environmental degradation that threatens the future of our planet.

You might ask how I can expect you to do all this? As a kindergarten teacher, a day-care provider, or an elementary school administrator, you may feel that it's not your place to teach young children about diversity, world poverty, or the destruction of the planet.

I would like to challenge this way of thinking and tell you that you can and you must make a difference, that children -- especially young children -- need your help now as never before, in all the areas I mentioned.

Regrettably, we don't have a lot of time together today, so I'd like to explain my meaning by concentrating on just one problem. It's something I consider to be one of the biggest obstacles to the development of children today: war and ethnic strife.

Today, more than 50 wars are raging in different parts of the globe. In many of these conflicts, children are no longer simply innocent victims, accidentally caught in war's crossfire. Instead, they are increasingly the target of attack, according to UNICEF, which describes the plight of children caught in war in its *State of the World's Children* report for 1996.

This is because many of today's conflicts are between ethnic groups in the same country or former state. In such struggles, warring factions often believe that killing adults is not enough. Future generations of the enemy -- children -- must also be destroyed. The consequence of this twisted reasoning is appalling. Over the last decade, UNICEF estimates, more than 2 million children have been killed in armed conflicts.

But children are not just the victims of armed conflict. They are now also increasingly the perpetrators of war, forced into combat by morally bankrupt adults long before they can begin to understand the consequences of their actions.

(Talk about Nelson Pedro, the 11-year-old boy you met in Mozambique who had killed so much and so often, he was unable to remember how many people had died at his hands.)

UNICEF says that boys and girls under the age of 16 have participated in conflicts in 25 countries. In parts of Africa, children as young as six years old have been recruited as soldiers. Often, these youngsters are kidnapped, then terrorized into killing their own families and others. In Rwanda, for the first time in history, children are facing trial for genocide.

You might ask why I am mentioning such horrors, that these problems are terrible, but there's nothing you can do to stop them. I believe you're wrong. As the educators and caretakers of young children who are in the critical early stages of development, you, perhaps more than any other group, are in a pivotal position to make the world a better, more peaceful place for everyone.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "If we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children."

UNICEF has begun to fight the rising tide of violence by supporting "peace education programs" around the world. These programs are designed to provide children with the basic tools they need to cope with adversity. They provide a cooperative learning

experience that prepares children to make choices in their lives, teaching them that violence is but one way to resolve conflict.

Such education can enhance self-esteem and respect for the rights of others, which is vital in overcoming the divisive forces of racism, sexism, and intolerance. UNICEF's experiences in many different countries show that peace education can unite communities divided by conflict. In Lebanon, where war raged for nearly two decades, peace camps for young people had the support of some 240 non-governmental organizations as well as the government, which has introduced the concept of education for peace into national school curricula. Six thousand young adults have been trained as "peace monitors" to work with younger children at the camps, where children learned conflict resolution. One youth leader who participated in the program told UNICEF: "I feel a wall breaking within me, and I find myself strongly belonging to this new world and to this religiously and geographically diversified group."

In Burundi, where communities were profoundly affected by the bloody events in neighboring Rwanda in 1994, a nationwide project called "Let's Build Peace," was launched in 1,500 primary and secondary schools and learning centers. Other peace education programs have been supported in the Sudan, Mozambique, the former Yugoslavia, Liberia, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and Egypt.

I wanted to bring such programs to your attention because I believe that peace education is important not just for children who have experienced armed conflict, but also for young people who have been lucky enough to escape the horror of war.

This is because every country is plagued to some extent by hatred, hostility, and violence stemming from discrimination against different ethnic and racial minority populations, women, and religious groups, not to mention people who speak different languages, people who come from different regions or economic backgrounds, people with physical and mental disabilities, or people from different age groups.

This sad fact became much more clear to me nearly two years ago when I went to the renowned Salzburg Seminar in Austria to co-chair an international gathering of more than 50 children's advocates -- people like you -- who all identified discrimination as the single most insidious barrier to the development of children worldwide.

Incidentally, this seminar was attended by Marilyn Smith, the executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and J.D. Andrews, the chief operations officer of the NAEYC. I understand the official report of this eye-opening session of the Salzburg Seminar has been made available to the members of the NAEYC, and I would urge all of you to take a look at it.

If you have read the report, you know that the seminar participants included teachers, doctors, lawyers, government officials, social workers, and psychologists from 36 countries. They gathered to discuss the many different challenges facing today's young people and how we can promote the well-being of children beyond just ensuring that they are able to survive -- physically -- into adulthood.

During this very intense seven-day seminar, racism, sexism, and classism were cited as problems that educators can help resolve.

The participants agreed that parents, teachers, and other caretakers of children could play a critical role in helping young people to look beyond negative stereotypes and recognize diversity as something that enriches rather than threatens their communities.

At the U.S. Committee for UNICEF, we are helping children in the United States learn more about the diversity they see in the classroom through education programs like National UNICEF Month and our trademark "Trick or Treat for UNICEF" campaign.

These programs seek to break down harmful stereotypes by showing U.S. children that all young people, whatever their color or culture, have similar dreams and values. They also teach important lessons about compassion and goodwill by encouraging children in this country to support UNICEF's efforts to save and improve the lives of millions of impoverished boys and girls around the world.

(Talk about Bridge of Understanding and goal of reaching every school across the country. Talk about need to build the "Kids Help Kids" movement across the U.S. Perhaps you might mention the Pier 1 Greeting Card Contest.)

This year, the U.S. Committee is spearheading another wonderful program: Olympic Aid-Atlanta.

(Talk about the history of the Olympic Truce, our involvement with Olympic-Aid Atlanta. Mention the "Olympic Aid Team for Children," which is spearheaded by gold-medal speed skater Johann Olav Koss, and includes Chicago's own Michael Jordan, another basketball great, Hakeem Olajuwon, tennis star Andre Agassi, and many other celebrity athletes.)

Won't you help us ensure that children have a "first call" not just in the war-torn nations of the world, but here at home and around the world?

You don't have to give a lot of time to volunteer for the U.S. Committee for UNICEF. I know many of you sell UNICEF greeting cards either from your home or from your schools, day care centers, and offices. That is a wonderful way to help. You can also assist us by holding a Halloween party and making sure that your students, children, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren "Trick or Treat for UNICEF."

You can bring our educational materials into your schools, day care centers, and into your own home. You can write your elected representatives and urge them to support funding for UNICEF and other children's legislation. You can urge Congress to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international treaty that seeks to improve the lives of children everywhere. The United States remains one of just six countries that has not yet ratified this landmark human rights document.

The choice is yours. But whatever you decide to do, remember that the children of the world need your help now more than ever before. We can't afford to have any more lost generations -- either here at home or around the world.

I would like to leave you with a quote from a young colleague of mine from the YWCA, which is where I worked before I came to the U.S. Committee. This woman spoke very passionately at the Salzburg Seminar and offered an extremely insightful pointer about

the best way to go about ensuring a better tomorrow for all young people.

She said: "People need to see every child as their own child. If you see a child that way, you can do nothing but love them. Loving them means helping them learn how to live productively in a world of great diversity. And if we seek the best for every child in every country starting at home, we will be able to achieve what is needed to promote the well-being of children the world over."